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DE RUEHLB #0496/01 1011154
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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1489
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN PRIORITY 1155
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 2129
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 2395
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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 000496

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/09/2018

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IS, LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: INCREASED HIZBALLAH ACTIVITY IN THE
BEKAA, ITALIAN AMBASSADOR SAYS

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Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons
section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (S) According to the Italian Ambassador to Lebanon, who meets occasionally with Hizballah officials, Hizballah is "off-balance" and has not yet decided how to respond to the February 12 assassination of Imad Moughnieh. Hizballah was moving its training operations to the Bekaa, while still pouring huge amounts of money into the south. Italy, through UNIFIL and its economic assistance programs, was working to counter Hizballah's influence in the south while also reorienting some of its aid to other regions, especially around Palestinian camps in the north. Balancing the various Christian forces was a key goal in this effort.

12. (C) The Italian Ambassador did not see a breakthrough to the ongoing political impasse, and predicted the opposition would react very negatively to any cabinet expansion. He expressed concerns about the security implications of a simple majority election, noting that it was not clear whether Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman would accept being elected in this manner. He also on the need for March 14 to engage more actively with independent Shia, commented that Aoun's popularity was fading, discounted the role of the Vatican, and commended the efforts of the March 14 Secretariat. End summary.

13. (C) Italian Ambassador to Lebanon Gabriele Checchia, accompanied by First Secretary Carlo Jacobucci, paid an introductory call on Charge Sison on April 9. Pol/Econ Chief also sat in on the meeting.

HIZBALLAH "OFF-BALANCE,"
MOVING TRAINING TO THE BEKAA

14. (S) Asked about his March 26 lunch invitation to Hizballah foreign relations advisor Nawaf Moussawi, Checchia freely admitted that he met occasionally with members of the group. "I am supposed to meet with Hizballah," he said. Political

considerations aside, he explained, it was important to be able to pass messages to those "who have an impact and can create problems." This was Italy's "added value," he said, and one which the Israelis appreciated as well. We can't afford to drive with blind spots, he added. Therefore, all communication was open, although Checchia by personal choice, opted never to meet on Hizballah turf. Instead, he met in "proper institutional" venues such as MP's offices.

¶5. (S) Checchia said he had extended the invitation to hear Hizballah's assessment of the assassination of Imad Moughnieh.

He also used the opportunity to send a message of caution, warning Hizballah to be aware of the risks it would run in Lebanon and regionally if it "overreacted" to the Moughnieh killing, telling Massawi, "Everyone will pay a price."

¶6. (S) Massawi reportedly responded that Hizballah was well aware of the risks of responding, but also of not responding -- the same thing, Checchia noted, that Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah had said publicly. He agreed with the Charge that Hizballah seemed to be off-balance following Moughnieh's assassination, though at the lunch Massawi, a member of the Hizballah politburo, towed the official party line. Even if Nasrallah puts the blame 100 percent on Israel, Checchia believed that deep down Hizballah realizes there is more to the story. The fact that Moughnieh's wife never denied saying that it wasn't Israel was significant in his eyes.

¶7. (S) Checchia also said that he was hearing about a "certain dissatisfaction" among Hizballah's rank and file, especially in the south, where rumors of a new conflict with Israel were rampant. People there, including families of Hizballah militants, are fed up and want to live a normal life, he explained. He had heard recently that there was an inner core of some 200 plus hard-liners, possibly financed by Iran, in Hizballah, followed by a larger group that also

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talked tough but was more realistic. The grass root supporters, however, were off-balance: they depended on the socio-economic networks provided by Hizballah but don't want their hands tied by Hizballah's actions. But it's difficult to assess the relative weight of these different components, Checchia concluded.

¶8. (S) Checchia said now that Hizballah could no longer conduct training south of the Litani, it was moving training to the Bekaa. "All we hear about is the Bekaa and the grey areas bordering Syria...many things are happening in that region," he said. Hizballah was moving outside its traditional areas, he commented, including Beirut, where it was increasing its presence in Christian neighborhoods. He admitted, however, that it was sometimes difficult to distinguish between Hizballah and Shia who were simply relocating due to fears of renewed conflict, and often there was overlap between the two.

UNIFIL: "ISLAND OF STABILITY" FOR NOW,
BUT UNLIKELY TO ESCAPE NEXT REGIONAL CONFLICT

¶9. (S) On UNIFIL, Checchia said his impression was that Commander Graziano felt that, for the time being, the situation was still under control and that the UNIFIL area of operations was an "island of stability". However, it would be impossible to isolate UNIFIL from a regional conflict, and UNIFIL's timeframe for disengagement would be limited. The Italian perception was that if the regional situation deteriorated, it would differ from the events of 2006 in that it would be difficult to isolate other countries from major confrontation and probably would take more time to resolve.

¶10. (C) Checchia admitted that the Italian participation in UNIFIL -- the largest contingent, with over 2500 troops -- had an impact on Italian policy. He himself was constantly mindful of the perception his statements might make and their

impact on the security of the troops on the ground.

¶11. (C) Noting that Hizballah also was pouring huge amounts of money into the south, Checchia said UNIFIL's civilian component was therefore a critical part of its long-term goals. Italy also was playing an important role here, providing assistance with infrastructure projects (rehabilitating schools and hospitals), demining, etc., often teaming up with local groups to complete projects. Italian assistance was both direct and through Lebanese NGOs. Checchia said he did not know whether Italy's efforts were "making a dent or having a political impact," especially against Hizballah, but at least the local population was aware that Hizballah was not the only provider.

¶12. (C) Most of Italy's troops are in the western, mostly Amal-dominated areas of south Lebanon, although Italy also carried out some projects in the eastern part with the help of local NGOs. Coordination with Amal was good, Checchia said, and Italy was trying to increase visibility for its activities through publicity and visits of high-level GOI officials.

REORIENTING ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE

¶13. (C) In addition to the assistance Italy provided immediately after the 2006 conflict, it was now looking to balance its cooperation with other areas of Lebanon, such as Akkar in the north, where it was working with UNDP to help Lebanese affected by the 2007 conflict at the Nahr al-Barid Palestinian camp, the Christian areas of Mount Lebanon, in part to counter Free Patriotic Movement leader General Michel Aoun's monopoly, and the Chouf (Druze stronghold). All of these areas were important politically, Checchia stressed, to provide balance between the various Christian forces, although it was still important not to neglect the Christians in the south.

¶14. (C) Checchia agreed with the Charge that these assistance programs were important tools for the U.S. and Italy's

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political missions and helped create better impressions of our two countries in Lebanon. Since the political situation won't be solved soon, we need to show we're supporting people on the ground, Checchia stressed, adding that this was the first thing he had told Massawi. It's hard to disagree with facts on the ground, he said.

¶15. (C) (Note: In a meeting that immediately followed, the Charge spoke with Osama Safa, the Executive Director of the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies. He commented that the Siniora government has not connected effectively with communities in south Lebanon. Despite the fact that PM Siniora himself is from the southern city of Sidon, he has not traveled to the south in the aftermath of the 2006 war either to inspect the damage or to promote the reconstruction work performed by the GOL. In an area where agriculture accounts for 27 percent of the economy, according to Safa, southern farmers felt particularly abandoned by the GOL. Much of their land is uncultivable due to the cluster munitions dropped by the IDF. Compensation from the GOL was slow in coming and Hizballah's assistance programs were viewed as the only help available to the rural poor, Safa emphasized. End note.)

NO POLITICAL SOLUTION IN SIGHT

¶16. (C) Checchia did not anticipate a breakthrough in the short-term in the ongoing political impasse. Checchia was relatively unconcerned about March 14 leaders sending mixed messages. On the contrary, he said this shows that the coalition is about free discussion, whereas Hizballah obviously would always have a unified message.

¶17. (C) Checchia said that he had discussed cabinet expansion in a recent meeting with former (pro-Syrian) PM Omar Karame, whose response was that even a "minor" expansion would be "very, very tough." Karame reportedly even objected to replacing assassinated Industry Ministry Pierre Gemayel, as this would usurp the prerogatives of the president. According to Checchia, Karame's adamant objections showed that the opposition was determined to prevent cabinet expansion of any kind, and was "hiding" behind the constitution.

¶18. (C) PM Siniora, whom Checchia called a "wise and prudent man," had told him two days earlier that he was proceeding cautiously, consistently stressing care for the Christians. Checchia agreed that Siniora's speech on the eve of the Arab League summit was very good, adding that his proposal for an inter-Arab conference on the Syria-Lebanon issue would have to include Damascus.

¶19. (C) Checchia opined that if a president was not elected before November, there would be no election. Noting that one Future MP was calling for an election before August 21 (the date consensus candidate and Lebanese Armed Forces Commander Michel Sleiman told As-Safir newspaper that he planned to leave office), Checchia warned that there could be serious security implications for proceeding with a simple majority votes, for MPs in particular, and it was not clear Sleiman would accept being elected with a simple majority. He viewed Sleiman's announcement to As-Safir as a warning to both sides to move things forward.

¶20. (C) Checchia said regional issues were the real issue -- would the U.S. adopt a bolder approach, i.e., by supporting a simple majority election? The Charge replied that, although PM Siniora was doing a commendable job under difficult circumstances, the U.S. was not happy with the current situation, which was not healthy. And the election was long overdue. Checchia agreed, adding that no candidate would ever receive a two-thirds majority.

¶21. (C) Checchia agreed with the Charge that recent media reports of a Sunni militia build-up were not helpful optics for March 14, and would only create further divisions between Sunni and Shia. March 14 Christians also are divided, he said, and there are excellent people out there whose voices

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aren't being heard.

¶22. (C) Saad's Future Movement was trying to increase its contacts with independent Shia, and some Christians were reaching out as well, Checchia said. Social Affairs Minister Nayla Mouawad had told him the day before that she was receiving positive signals from independent Shia. Ultimately, however, what was the goal of these Shia, Checchia asked. How influential are they in their communities, he asked. When one component of their community is heavily armed, it's not easy for them to speak out, he noted, but at least now they have options. We need to capitalize on promoting the idea that there is a Shia alternative, he stressed.

¶23. (C) Checchia said Druze leader Walid Jumblatt wisely was keeping his lines of communication open with Speaker Berri. This was out of necessity, he explained, because the Chouf is the front-line against Hizballah-dominated Lebanon. Good relations with the Shia are Walid's fallback position, so he can't be seen as a hard-liner when it comes to dealing with Amal; it's part of the "protective network" around him, Checchia said.

¶24. (C) Checchia, who was scheduled to see Aoun immediately following his meeting with the Charge, said people were tired of the General, though Aoun refused to see this. Instead, he was calling for parliamentary elections now based on the 1960

law, which Checchia deemed a "shrewd move" that, though causing some losses for the Free Patriotic Movement, would secure the Hizballah votes that in the 2005 elections went to March 14 Christians. Aoun also was playing the "clergy card," using some bishops who were close to him (i.e., Mazloum) to play a very negative role.

¶25. (C) Checchia viewed the role of the Vatican in Lebanon as "hesitant," noting that relations between the Holy See and the Patriarch were "difficult." The Patriarch refused to accept any pressure from Rome, and the Papal Nuncio in Lebanon was resigned to this fact.

¶26. (C) The March 14 General Secretariat was going a good job, but needed to do an overall review of where the coalition was going and what it wanted to accomplish. Checchia said his constant message to March 14 and Saad in particular was that they needed to get their act together as "time is running short."
SISON